Pay all city bills on user-friendly page

Finance department answers public outcry

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By CARRIE KIRSCHNER - The Independent

ASHLAND — The finance department is leading the City of Ashland's march into a more comprehensive Web presence.

Residents can now pay all city bills online, according to Toniqua Thomas, an accounts receivable supervisor in the city's finance department. Thomas said property taxes, occupational license fees and parking tickets are among the payments being offered online.

"We've had a request to do it from the public and the Department of Finance is committed to serving the citizens of Ashland," she said.

The city has offered the option to pay utility bills online since last February but the number of residents who use the online service is growing monthly, Thomas said.

Further expansion of online services is also in the works, according to Thomas. "We're always looking to expand services." Possibilities include: Online signup for new occupational license fees and occupational net profits and returns.

According to Ashland City Manager Randy Robertson, the online payment upgrades may be the first of many changes to Ashland's Web presence and technology infrastructure.

Last week, the Ashland Board of City Commissioners heard the findings of a technology assessment conducted by ConnectKentucky and the Infrastructure Management Institute at Northern Kentucky University.

Robertson said the assessment is one of three independent analyses recently conducted on the city's technological infrastructure.

The ConnectKentucky report found the city had room for improvement in several areas including its Web presence, information backup processes, infrastructure security, and network infrastructure configuration.

Among the most pressing need is the expansion and upgrade of Ashland's Web page (www.ashlandky.org). According to Robertson, the city's Web page can help or hurt it in the economic development game.

"The bottom line is ... if you don't have a user friendly, viable, bright, up-to-date Web presence ... if you don't have a strong one in this day and age then you aren't part of the game," Robertson said.

"Ashland seems to have a good Web page but we, like 14,000 other communities, can do better. Part of this initiative is to see if we can do better," he added.

Chris Pullem, economic and development director, expressed the same view. "From an economic development perspective we need to increase and enhance our Web presence, adding data we have but don't have on our Web site," he said.

He said the finance departments addition of online services was a step in the right direction. He called them "signs of the city taking advantage of the latest and greatest technology," which he said gives a "business friendly" impression of the city.

According to Pullem and Robertson, city staff will present commissioners with the results of the assessments and several options of how to proceed.

Commissioner Paula Hogsten said she has a vision of the direction she'd like the city to head. She said she'd like to see the city explore becoming a wireless community in addition to upgrading the Web page "to make it more accurately represent Ashland."

Commissioner Kevin Gunderson said he hopes an overhaul of the Web page is done "during the course of this year."

"It's almost as important as having adequate telephone service within the city building," he said of the importance of the city's Web presence but said the city should be cautious in its approach.

"I think we need a comprehensive Web site but I don't want to spend an exorbitant amount of money on doing so. There are snake oil salesmen that will

sell cities comprehensive Web sites for tens of thousands of dollars and that's not necessary," Gunderson said.

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